The Aporia of Time in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*

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**Abstract**

In its narrative form and in the philosophical issues raised by its narrator, Swift’s *Waterland* brings into question the distinctions between past and future, beginning and end, cause and effect on which the concept of linear, chronological time depends. It does so partly by pointing to the “infinite regress” in which any quest for origins or first causes is inevitably involved and partly by demonstrating that human affairs also follow the same “pattern of eddying repetition” as “natural history,” that human beings are driven by the same “insidious longing to revert” as eels or geese. In individual lives as well as the grand stage of historical events, the “natural stuff” of which human beings are made is “always getting the better of the artificial stuff”—of the purposive designs that we try to impose on experience to give it meaning and structure. What this means for Tom Crick’s narrative is that “the complete and final version” of his story can never be told, that the events he is trying to describe are always disrupting the linear, progressive frame that he tries to impose on them, pointing to another mode of time that somehow underlies or supercedes the linear, causal one. Because Tom is suspicious of our “insidious longing to revert” and unwilling to transgress the limits of our time-bound phenomenal world, however, there must be a second Crick brother in the novel who is relatively uninscribed by the symbolic order, capable of “going beyond or getting outside himself,” of returning to the undifferentiated generative matrix that is the source of all particular time-bound forms. Though he generally condemns “regression” as a betrayal of civilization, Tom can describe his brother’s return to this maternal matrix as a triumph because it demonstrates the limits inherent in any specific symbolic “transcription” of reality, the inadequacy to experience of any totalizing religious or philosophical terminology. The water to which Dick returns is destructive of human distinction and order, but it is also a perpetual source of new beginnings, the site of everlasting renewal and regeneration.

**Keywords**

time, narrative, linear, repetition, cyclical, memory, symbolic order
At the level at which “involuntary memory” takes place, Walter Benjamin suggests, events are connected, not on the basis of logical identity or of temporal or spatial contiguity, but of “resemblances” or “correspondences” that he describes as “opaque” (204, 211), as impervious to logical elucidation. As Genevieve Lloyd describes the process, it is the “incidental accompaniments of a sensation” that are seized upon by “involuntary memory”—those qualities of sight or sound or smell that have been “set aside by intellect” as “irrelevant to the process of forming general concepts” (141). One distinguishing characteristic of a “remembering author” like Proust, therefore, is that linear, chronological time tends to break down in his work, that the narrative tends to loop or swirl or circle back on itself, following what J. Hills Miller describes as “a pattern of eddying repetition” (34). Events that form a rational point of view would seem completely unrelated are experienced as echoes or repetitions, as being “superimposed” on one another in a “layering of different strata of time” (Lloyd 144). In “the universe of convolution” inhabited by a “remembering author,” in fact, “everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar one to another” (Benjamin 211, 204). A “remembered event,” in contrast to an experienced one, is “infinite” in its implications or associations (Benjamin 202), so that a narrative like Proust’s that is based on the mémoire involontaire must move “back and forth discontinuously across time seeking unsuccessfully some motionless point in its flow” (Miller 34).

Though Benjamin applies them only to Proust and, to a lesser extent, Baudelaire (157-62), his observations on memory and narrative form apply with equal validity to such recent “novels of memory” as Obasan or The English Patient or—in the present case—Graham Swift’s Waterland. “[S]omething in nature wants to go back,” Swift’s narrator, Tom Crick, remarks at one point in Waterland (17), and along with Kogawa’s and Ondaatje’s, his narrative provides one of the best demonstrations in contemporary fiction that there is also something in narrative that “wants to go back,” a tendency that Frank Kermode characterizes as “an atavism of our temporal attitudes” (55). Not only does Tom’s narrative go “backward as it goes forward,” not only does it “loop” and “take detours” in the manner that he ascribes to history (135): it also progressively undermines the distinctions of past and future, beginning and end, cause and effect that the concept of linear, chronological time depends upon. Though he goes on practically to the end of the novel insisting on the human need for stories and historical explanations, he does so in the face of growing evidence that any complete, connected account of human affairs is an “impossible thing” (108). What history actually teaches
us, in fact, is to be skeptical of the kind of historical “Grand Narratives” that impelled his Atkinson ancestors (62, 92), to recognize the severe limitations under which our “power to explain” actually operates (108).

One obvious limitation to history as an “accredited subscience” (86), Tom points out, is that there is never a clearcut end (or beginning) to the chain of causes and effects that one is inquiring into, that behind any explanation one may give of the present state of affairs there is always a further question: “But why *that* reason? Because ... And when we have that further reason, But why again—? Because ... Why? Because...Why?...” (107). If historical inquiry proceeds, like a criminal investigation, by “work[ing] backwards from what came after to what came before” (106), the difficulty is in determining how far back is enough: “when—where—how do we stop asking why?” (107). In his effort to understand the impasse he and Mary have arrived at in their lives, Tom “works backwards” not only to their adolescence but to his parents’ and grandparents’ and great-great grandparents’ lives, to the earliest recorded reference to Cricks or Atkinsons, and in the end he is still forced to admit that their tragedy is “inexplicable,” that in his effort to explain it, he has only “reached the limits of his power to explain” (108-09). “The beginning?” he exclaims as he contemplates the complexities involved in explaining his wife’s baby-snatching to the police: “But where’s that? How far back is that?” (314).

In Kermode’s view, of course, there is a direct relationship between our ability to establish beginnings and ends and our ability to perceive structure and significance in a particular interval of time. In the absence of some kind of meaningful connection “between the moment and a remote origin and end” (50), we are stuck in what he refers to as “simple chronicity” (46) or “mere successiveness” (50). It is some such condition as this that Tom seems to have in mind when he proposes his “theory” that reality is actually “uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens” (40). For Tom, as for Kermode, beginnings and ends together with the temporal structure that they confer are actually imposed on experience by the human mind because we find “purely successive, disorganized time” intolerable (Kermode 45)—because, as Tom himself puts it, human beings want “to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories” (63). Human beings tell stories and construct histories for the same reason that they fall in love or foment revolutions or build industrial empires like that of the Atkinsons: because they yearn “for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content” (41), because they want to “make the empty world seem full” (52). By establishing a relationship
between the present and “a remote origin and end,” they are “purging” time of “simple
chronicity, of the emptiness of tock-tick, humanly uninteresting successiveness” (Kermode 46). As Robert Irish puts it, stories are “fear-quelling” because they provide
a refuge from the “empty space” of reality, from the chaos of “the here and now”
(920-21). The question, of course, is whether the “origins and ends” necessary for such
“purging” can really be secured.

Even more devastating to his youthful dream of extracting “an Explanation” from
history (62, 108), however, is the “other form of retrogression” that Tom introduces in
relation to “the Question Why” (106-07): the “insidious longing” that human beings
feel, when their lives have broken down, to reverse the course of events, “to return to
the time before history claimed us, before things went wrong” (136). If the possibility
of a complete, definitive historical knowledge is thrown into question by Tom’s first
“form of retrogression,” the very idea of linear, progressive time, of ends that are
distinguishable from beginnings, is undermined by this second one. “We believe we
are going forward, toward the oasis of Utopia,” Tom observes at one point in his
narrative: “But how do we know—only some imaginary being looking down from the
sky (let’s call him God) can know—that we are not moving in a great circle?” (135). It
is this latter possibility that Tom’s historical inquiries ultimately tend to support: the
possibility that the goals and purposes that we propose to ourselves are really always
“the image of some lost, imagined past” (141), that the happiness we take to be
“unprecedented” or “unheard of” is actually only “the eternal repetition, the eternal
restoration, of the original, the first happiness” (Benjamin 204). Identified by
Benjamin with the realm of dreams and involuntary recollections, the “universe of
convolution” expands in the course of Tom’s narrative to include nearly every aspect
of our personal or historical experience.

The most obvious examples of this cyclical, regressive tendency in things come
from the natural world, of course. To distinguish it from the teleological conception of
time that underlies a historical “Grand Narrative” like the Atkinsons’, Tom even refers
to it as “Natural History” or “natural stuff” (137, 205), identifying it—“this unfathom-
able stuff we’re made of”—with our inborn “love of life,” with the curiosity that “weds
us to the world” (205-06). The main thing to be said about this “natural stuff” from
Tom’s point of view, of course, is that it “doesn’t care two hoots about History, or what
the history books call History” (195), that in relation to the purposive designs of
“revolutionaries and prophets of new worlds and even humble champions of Progress”
like the Atkinsons, it is always “anarchic” and “seditious” (205), always “tak[ing] us
back, either via catastrophe and confusion or in our heart’s desire, to where we were” (137). In the case of the European Eel, for example, Tom emphasizes that its reproductive cycle is completely unaffected by such cataclysmic human events as World War I (201), that it goes on repeating its “old, epic story,” its “vast atavistic circles” across the Atlantic, in complete indifference to human conceptions of progress and purposive development (204). The difference between “Natural History” and the linear, progressive history that Tom characterizes as “artificial” (206) is that it “doesn’t go anywhere,” that it “perpetually travels back to where it came from” (205).

Even more suggestive of the indifference of this “natural stuff” to human notions of progress and purposive development is the “unmoved motion” of the river Ouse (142). Though to the human observer it might appear to flow in only one direction, the truth is that the Ouse flows in “an eternal circle” (146), evaporation from the sea and returning like every other river “back to itself, to its own source” (145). Far from supporting Heraclitus’s famous observation concerning rivers, it actually seems to refute it, along with the linear, successive concept of time on which it is based. For if the Ouse is indifferent to human ideals of progress and development, if it flows on in complete disregard for “the three Stone Ages, the Beaker Folk, the Bronze Age, Iron Age, the Belgic Tribes and all their flints, pots, axes, brooches and burial customs,” it is because it belongs to a different order of time from the linear, progressive one imposed on experience by human perception, because it “possess[es] as no man […] does, the secret capacity to move yet remain” (143). From Kermode’s point of view, of course, it is the aevum that the Ouse belongs to: that “third order of duration, distinct from time and eternity,” that was invented during the Middle Ages to accommodate the “peculiar betwixt-and-between position of angels” (Kermode 70-71). Only in this “third intermediate order” of time, Kermode claims, can things “be perpetual without being eternal” (72)—can the same form or function, the same “old, epic story,” go on repeating itself in the midst of flux. The Ouse is crucial to Tom’s narrative quest because it points him toward a mode of time and temporal connection in which his and Mary’s experience might at last begin to make sense: toward a world that Benjamin describes as being “distorted in the state of resemblance” (205). Only by entering this world, by giving up any pretense to linear, sequential, causal explanation, would it be possible to tell “the whole story” (8, 109, 334).

Though the most obvious examples of the cyclic, regressive tendency in things are to be found in nature, Tom insists that the “human heart” is also ruled by the same basic “law” (73): that, despite the appearance it gives of progression and linear
development, human history also tends to “twist and turn” and “go in circles,” to “bring us back to the same place” (142). In Tom’s view, in fact, all the developments that we think of as being “forward movements of civilization”—the invention of the printing press or steam engine or airplane—are also agents of destruction and retrogression (135-36), functioning with the same sinister duplicity as his silt both to demolish and to build (9), to make and to unmake (11). The same teleological ambiguity also characterizes revolutions, which, though they are commonly thought of as involving some sort of “categorical change,” an abrupt “leap into the future,” also contain “an opposite if less obvious tendency: the idea of a return. A redemption; a restoration” (137). Ostensibly dedicated to establishing “a Society of the Future” (138), “revolutionary messiahs” like Robespierre and Marat are actually motivated by what Foucault would call “the pursuit of the origin” (142), by the desire to restore a state of purity and innocence that they believe actually existed at some remote period in the past (137-38). Like the Platonizing historians that Foucault attacks in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” they apparently feel that it is only necessary to strip away the “masks” of decadence and falsehood imposed on them by intervening generations and the “primordial truth” of things will once again be revealed (Foucault 142). Instead of the positive work of progress and improvement, therefore, they wind up directing their energies to destruction and demolition, to stripping away what they regard as “the impedimenta of history” (136).

Though it is probably easier to see in the grand cycles of history, Tom contends that the same “law” of regression and repetition also governs our everyday private lives, that individually as well as communally we tend to confuse our origins with our ends. “What we wish upon the future,” he observes, “is very often the image of some lost, imagined past” (140-41). Do his students represent a promise for the future, a unique potentially for moral growth and development, or are they “little parcels of paradise,” embodiments of a purity and innocence that is doomed to be lost (235)? In his own case, Tom admits, he has come to see in their faces “less and less the image of the future, more and more that of something he is trying to retrieve, something he has lost [...]” (126). At the bottom of his disagreement with Lewis about the methods and aims of education is an even more fundamental disagreement about the nature of time: whether it follows the linear, progressive model espoused by the modern social sciences or the “pattern of eddying repetition” found in literature and myth (Miller 34). It is Tom’s view, of course, that children will grow up “to make the same mistake as their parents, that the same old things will repeat themselves” (240).
Are we moving forward in time toward “the oasis of the yet-to-come,” then, or are we travelling backwards, toward “some other green Elysium that, a long while ago, we left behind” (136)? Only if we could distinguish with confidence between our beginnings and our ends could we give a definitive answer to questions such as these, and one upshot of Tom’s dialectical questioning is that that distinction keeps breaking down, that it is subject to the same process of merger and interchange as the distinction in Benjamin’s work between the container and thing contained (204-05) or that in Kenneth Burke’s between the idea of the intrinsic and the extrinsic (Grammar 23-26, 468-70). Though he never completely dispenses with it, Tom has effectively undermined the concept of linear, progressive time embraced by Lewis and his Atkinson ancestors, laying the foundation for a universe like Proust’s and Baudelaire’s that is based on semblance and correspondence (Benjamin 204-11), on patterns of duplication or “eddying repetition” (Miller 31-39). In fact he has undermined the distinction between “narrative and nothingness” on which he bases the peculiar value ascribed to history and storytelling (Decoste 393).

The attraction of a cyclical, repetitive view of time for a historian like Tom, of course, is that the past retains its relevance in such a view, that it is never completely superceded, as it is for Lewis and the social sciences that he favors, by the changing interests and attitudes of the present. “The past clings” (103), and in his references to an incident like the one on the banks of the Hockwell Lode involving Mary and the eel (180-93), that is precisely what Tom insists on: that the experience “lingers” (245) or “lodges” in the mind (208), that it is always “return[ing]” or “ris[ing], buoyantly and pungently, to the surface […]” (252). Though they are by nature “unique and momentous” (275), it is characteristic of experiences such as this one that they are never entirely over and done with, that there is always “something left behind” in their wake (251). In the aftermath of his mother’s death, Tom recalls, he and his father and brother were united in the conviction that she really wasn’t dead at all: “that from some hidden vantage point she still watched over them and held the cottage under her protection” (284). Ostensibly riveting us to the exigencies of “the here and now,” such experiences actually serve to “announce that time has taken us prisoner” (61), that we will never be able to escape the grip of the past.

As the example of Tom’s mother indicates, it is in the form of the “Oedipal Syndrome” or “Mother Fixation” (88) that the past turns out to cling most tenaciously for the characters in Waterland. Despite the public homage that they paid to the “noble and impersonal Idea of Progress” (92), for example, Tom suggests that even in the
generation of George and Alfred Atkinson the real motivating force behind their entrepreneurial activities was their mother Sarah (83-88), that their “tireless industry” was in fact “nothing other than Sexual Energy” that had been conscientiously “pumped into new channels” (88). If their regressive impulses had a limited practical effect on their lives—Tom refers to “a certain frosty forlornness” on the part of “their otherwise charming wives” as well as “a certain fulsome affection they were wont to display [...] to their ribboned and crinolined daughters” (88)—it is because George and Alfred still believed wholeheartedly in economic and social progress, in the values that Tom associates with “Artificial History.” Only when this faith begins to crumble—only when their affairs suddenly and irretrievably start to “go wrong”—are the Atkinsons exposed to the full force of their repressed atavistic impulses. It is Ernest Atkinson who suffers this debilitating collapse of faith, of course, and who in reaction to it “beats a headlong retreat, backwards, inwards, to Paradise” (220). Not only does Ernest fall in love with his own daughter, but he succumbs to an even more pernicious form of modernist regression (Kermode 109-14) by embracing the “myth” that the offspring of their union will be the “Saviour of the World” (220). Unable to impose a meaningful shape on time, he resorts to the familiar modernist expedient of abolishing it, of “tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future [...]” (228). In doing so, he establishes the context within which subsequent generations of Atkinsons and Cricks will be forced to work out their own temporal destinies.

Tom’s belief that children always grow up “to make the same mistakes as their parents” is borne out particularly by his own generation of Atkinsons and Cricks. Despite the effort made by their mother to loosen the knot her father has tied in time (229), Tom and his brother Dick fall victim to the same regressive urges as George or Alfred or Ernest. After his mother died, Tom tells us, he was seized by the usual “insidious longing to revert” that follows a disaster: the longing “to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong” (136). Specifically, he felt that he had to “find again, at least revive in some new form [...] the image of his departed Mummy” (283). This is the same need felt by his forebears George and Alfred, of course, but while they embodied the image of their mother in such abstract “guises” as a Guardian Angel or Saint Gunnhilda or the “intrepid Brittania” (94), Tom winds up embodying his in Mary, in the form of a living, breathing human being. That is why Mary seems to be “an untouchable madonna” to him at first (48), why he feels that he is “fated to yearn from afar” for her (47): because the reality that she embodies for him is one that can never be fully attained, that will go on receding like those elusive
beginnings of his “into the obscure and irrecoverable distance” (328). Mary does offer him a “miniature model of reality” in the form of her “empty but fillable vessel” (42), of course, but that is ultimately as inadequate to his Oedipal desire as the various theories or models of history that he takes up are to his desire for “History itself” (62). Like the Lacanian desire for the “réel,” Tom’s longing is destined to “breach” or “exceed” or “overflow” any specific frame that he tries to fit it into (Chambers 131-33), including that of linear, chronological time. Like Dick’s desire, it is simply “Too Big” (58, 260) to be contained by the phenomenal, time-bound world that he finds around him. As a longing for the origin, it points to something outside of time, something that precedes and underlies our familiar time-bound, phenomenal world.

If Tom’s Oedipal desire is “Too Big” for the phenomenal framework that he tries to fit it into, the experiences that he narrates are also too big for the linear chronological frame into which he tries to fit them. Whatever else might be said about them, experiences involving incest and abortion, murder and suicide and child-abduction, all have to do in one way or another with the mysteries of origin and end, and it is in the nature of such mysteries that time and space cannot contain them, that they always point beyond the phenomenal appearance of things toward something that underlies or precedes it, that is radically different in its form or substance. As Foucault points out in rejecting it as a legitimate object of historical inquiry, the origin always “comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony” (143). One of Tom’s own frustrations as a historian is that one can never identify the beginning or end of anything in time, that chains of cause and effect go on receding endlessly into the past or future. If one is interested in the origins and ends of things, then one apparently must turn like Mary or Ernest to some sort of extra-temporal realm—to Kermode’s aevum or Benjamin’s “universe of convolution,” even to the “natural stuff” of Tom’s that he believes works to contravene any grand, purposive design in history (205). In any experience having to do with origins and ends, therefore, one can expect a break or rupture of some sort in “the normative illusion of continuous duration,” something to suggest that there might be “another time, another temporality than that of human perception” (Lukacher 76, 77). In Kermode’s view, in fact, we are actually “transported beyond the ignorant present” by such experiences (84), forced to re-examine those “concords of past, present, and future” that lie outside of time, that belong to the “third intermediate order” of duration known as the aevum (89).

If Tom’s narrative “twists” and “turns” and “goes in circles” (142), then, it is
because the experiences it deals with are resistant to linear, chronological form, because they point to a completely different mode of temporal organization. Tom’s first thought when he arrives home to discover that Mary has suddenly and inexplicably become a mother, for example, is that this experience lies outside his area of expertise, that it is one of those times in life when “history dissolves, chronology goes backwards” (265). A similar ontological jolt is produced by his brother’s plunge into the Ouse in the closing chapter of the novel. As he struggles to recall those last few minutes before Dick climbed onto the rail of the Rosa II, Tom is forced to admit that he can’t “be sure whether what I saw, I saw first in anticipation before I actually saw it, as if I had witnessed it somewhere already—a memory before it occurred” (356). As a devotee of “an accredited sub-science” like history, of course, Tom would prefer to believe that temporal events are unique, the result of linear causal sequences that can never be duplicated. “It only happens once,” he tells himself regarding his mother’s impending death: “it won’t be repeated for you. Note it, observe it” (275). Can such a position be maintained in the face of experiences like those just described, however? Tom’s conclusion apparently is that it can’t be, that the desire to restore or resurrect the past—“to return to that time before history claimed us” (136)—is simply too strong in human beings and that it always take us back eventually to where we started from. Though distinctions like past and present, cause and effect, beginning and end are essential for the conscious, purposive organization of our experience, it is likeness or correspondence—“the deeper resemblance of the dream world” (Benjamin 204)—that ultimately determines the shape and content of our lives.

Though he acknowledges the influence of regressive desire on human behavior, however, Tom does not acknowledge the possibility that anything positive or beneficial might come of it. The difference between him and Kogawa’s Naomi Nakane or Ondaatje’s Count Almásy is that he seems to regard any desire to go back—or “go beyond”—as dangerous and destructive. If the Atkinsons’ faith in the “noble and impersonal Idea of Progress” (93) is to be treated with suspicion and distrust, so also is the Cricks’ fatalistic belief that “the waters will return,” that everything will always be reduced to nothing in the end (17). Civilization may be an “artifice” imposed by human will on the recalcitrant stuff of an alien reality (140-41)—it may not be “natural” or “real” as the Atkinsons and their Victorian contemporaries believed (336)—but in Tom’s view it is all the more precious for that, all the more deserving of defense and preservation. The most obvious threat to its preservation, of course, is the desire to go back, to return to some mythical state of unity of harmony or integration in
the past: “To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age” (136). To give in as Mary and his grandfather Ernest do to one’s regressive impulses is to betray “the hard, inglorious business” of maintaining civilization (336), to beat a “headlong retreat” back to illusion and make-believe (220).

Tom’s instinct, then, is to resist any kind of regressive religious or mystical impulse, to cling stubbornly to the hard empirical “facts” of the case (86-88), the phenomenal outward appearance of things: “this is Mary; this is a bench; this is a dog” (148). If his narrative “goes backwards as it goes forwards” (135), it does not do so in the way that Naomi Nakane’s or Count Almásy’s does toward some undifferentiated, preconscious state of wholeness and integration. Of the two forms of “retrogression” that he distinguishes, his is obviously of the first, interrogatory type (106-67): an attempt to understand how he and Mary have arrived at the impasse that they have in their lives. Only once can Tom really be said to have transgressed the limits of phenomenal reality—when he and Mary make their journey to Martha Clay’s cottage in hopes of making her pregnancy and the tragic chain of events that stem from it “unhappen” (295). In making this journey, they are obviously entering a different world from the phenomenal, time-bound one that we are accustomed to: a world in which “Now and Long Ago are the same [...]” (303), in which the distinction between past and future, beginning and end, parents and their children has broken down (304). The main lesson that Tom seems to take away from this experience, however, is that any attempt to go back is dangerous and destructive, that in trying to free oneself of the past, one runs the risk of abolishing time altogether, of depriving oneself of a future as well as a past. The suspicion and distrust with which he regards that “bastard but pampered child, Nostalgia” (136) can be traced back to the pail of “red spittle” that he is instructed to dump into the Ouse (317), to the sight of Martha Clay crouching between Mary’s “gory knees,” her “blood-bag cheeks working like bellows” (308).

It is because Tom takes this attitude of suspicion and distrust toward regressive desire that there has to be a second Crick brother, subject to the same desire that he is but free of his skepticism and distrust. When their mother dies, Dick reacts in much the same way as Tom (283), refusing to believe that “she can have gone where she can’t be retrieved” and searching desperately for some means by which she might be restored to him (244-45). In the end, he even makes the same association that Tom does between his lost mother and Mary, identifying the “beautiful feeling” that he has come to have for her (251) with the feeling that he used to have for his “poor Mum” (257). The difference between the two brothers, however, is that as a “potato-head” or “numb-
skull” (242-43), Dick has none of the hang-ups that Tom does about history or progress or civilization, that he can follow desire regardless of the disruptions it may threaten to cause in “the laws of motion and succession” (Lukacher 77).

It is symptomatic of this difference in attitude that Tom turns to history for answers to the “big and teasing questions” in his life (243) but that his brother turns to the natural world, to the river and the “magical eel-traps” that are lowered “empty and barren” into it each night and then hauled up again “full of slithery quickness” (245). What attracts Dick to the river obviously is its capacity to restore the losses of time, to go on endlessly filling and re-filling the traps that are lowered into it. The river is always regressing, always repeating the same familiar forms, and if it can replenish lost eels, it should be able to bring his mother back as well, to tell him “where [she] has gone and how she might return” (245). Long before he settles on Mary as the specific phenomenal form that his desire will take, Dick has settled on the river as the undifferentiated generative matrix from which that form must arise. If Mary winds up taking on a special Oedipal significance in his eyes, it is because an association has been established in his mind between her and the river.

For Dick, then, there is something more to reality than the phenomenal outward appearance of things. Instead of being restricted as Tom is to the form actually taken by things, he has the option of going back to the source, to “the formless feminine receptacle of all forms” (Brivic 129). Like earlier generations of Cricks, he is “amphibian” (13), capable of adapting to the watery indistinction that underlies appearances, that is constantly making and unmaking the determinate phenomenal forms. In the two prodigious dives that he makes, there is even a suggestion that he undergoes a change in form himself, a metamorphosis from man into some sort of hybrid “fish of a man” (190, 357). Along with Sarah Atkinson, he is the character in the novel who most stubbornly resists any effort to fix or contain him.

Even in his first dive, there is reason to believe that Dick is going beyond form, that he is escaping from “masculine fixity” into some sort of “feminine flow” (Brivic 28). Among the hypotheses that Tom offers for the abrupt disappearance of his erection, the most “wildly speculative” is the possibility that he has achieved “some satisfaction, some ecstasy that even Mary cannot give [...]”—that in the course of his prolonged underwater swim he has actually experienced an orgasm (190-91). If this hypothesis is correct, of course, then Mary is not the ultimate object of Dick’s desire. In order to achieve a genuinely satisfying jouissance, he has had to go beyond her to a state of diffusion and indistinction such as the river water can provide. If he is in a better
position to take this step than Tom, it is because, as a “potato-head” or “numbskull” (242-43), he has not been as thoroughly inscribed by the symbolic order. As a “space left unmarked by signs or language” (Chambers 133), he still has direct access to a reality that for Tom and most of the rest of us has to be mediated by determinate symbolic images like Mary or Saint Gunnhilda or Tom’s “river of children” (127).

In reality, of course, not even a “potato-head” can escape entirely from cultural and social inscription. It is essential to the plot of *Waterland*, in fact, that Dick becomes progressively more densely inscribed as the novel goes on, progressively more deeply enmeshed in a determinate symbolic identity. The effect particularly of Tom and Mary’s educational efforts is to impose a specific subject position on him, to make him a prisoner of time like themselves (61). By the closing chapters of the novel, he is as desperate as they are to make the past “unhappen,” to escape the “imprisoning solidity of his own experience” (318). In his case, however, there is still something “on the other side of language, reason and thought” (Chambers 133) that he has the option of going back to. When he climbs onto the rail of the *Rosa II*, he is making a choice between the “undifferentiated space” associated with childhood and the mother’s body (Brivic 129) and the symbolically inflected space that Henry Crick tries to coax him back into with his last-minute offer to be his father (356).

If Dick really is defying the symbolic order with his dive, however, why does Tom not disavow it as another “headlong retreat,” another betrayal of the “hard, inglorious business” of maintaining civilization? Why does he declare, in a tone almost of triumph, that his brother is “on his way. Obeying instinct. Returning” (357)? Though it does not involve the religious delusions that Ernest’s or Mary’s regression does, Dick’s act is every bit as subversive of history or progress or civilization. More than any other incident in the novel, in fact, it seems to affirm the existence of another order of time underlying the familiar linear, successive one and condemning it to indeterminacy. How can Tom plead the case for Enlightenment values like science and education and still find anything to celebrate in an act that embraces “eternal return” or “eternal repetition” as a fundamental reality? What has become of the suspicion and distrust that he has been preaching up till now toward our “insidious longing to revert” (136)?

Though he does reject all efforts to “return” or “revert” or “go beyond,” Tom is still sympathetic with the impulse behind such efforts, with the desire to escape the oppressive burden imposed on us by the symbolic order. That is one reason why he teaches his students to be skeptical of historical Grand Narratives (62), to recognize
“the limits of our powers to explain” (108). No matter what specific form it takes, the symbolic order always operates by exclusion and repression, by deflecting our attention from most of reality. If it is a mistake to imagine that one can dispense altogether with reason or symbolicity, it is an even greater mistake to buy completely into any one specific “transcription” of reality, into any one particular “terministic screen” (Burke, Language 44-62). Part of what Tom means by “making do” or being “realistic” is learning to get along without the “shortcuts to Salvation” provided by totalizing religious or political or philosophical terminologies. It is the insecurity involved in this “making do” that Mary and Ernest are finally unable to endure, that causes them to “regress to myth” (Kermode 109, 39). The reason Tom can take a positive view of Dick’s dive into the Ouse, then, is that, instead of affirming one particular symbolic “transcription” of reality, it serves to remind us of the “excess” or “silent surplus” that in any symbolic coding always “remains beyond the frame, apparently dumb [...]” (Chambers 133). Dick is the “Saviour of the World” because, like the mysterious life-cycle of the eel (203), he testifies to the limits of the symbolic order, to the impossibility of Tom’s ever fulfilling his promise to tell “the whole story” (109, 337-43), to give the “complete and final version” (8).

As it turns out, then, the “wide empty space of reality” (17) has the same ambiguous status for Tom as silt (8-9) or phlegm (344). Particularly if one accepts the claim made by Decoste and McKinney that Tom privileges questions above answers and inquiry above conclusions (Decoste 294-98; McKinney 30-31), then there has to be something outside the symbolic order that has not yet been inscribed, something that refuses to be contained even within the framework of causality or linear, successive time. That is why Tom makes the connection that he does between our curiosity and “Natural History” or “natural stuff,” characterizing both as “anarchic” or “seditious,” as disruptive of the grand purposive designs that historians or revolutionaries or social engineers are always trying to impose on life (205-06). It is a curious connection for Tom to make, of course, because it is the “natural stuff” in us that “wants to go back” (17), that wants to reduce all structure and meaning to watery indistinction (13). It is the “natural stuff” that has to be channeled and contained by civilization, that is always threatening to erupt in another round of violence and destruction. What room would there be for curiosity and inquiry in the world, however, if there wasn’t some sort of “counterfinal tendency” in things that thwarted our purposes and designs (Decoste 390), that constantly emptied the world of the meaning and order that we try to impose? Water may dissolve and destroy, reducing human order and distinction to the same
indeterminate nothingness (13), but as Dick realizes in watching the “magical eel-traps” being hauled up from river (245), it is also a perpetual source of new beginnings, the site of an everlasting renewal and regeneration.

**Works Cited**


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Rufus Cook earned his Ph.D. in literary theory and aesthetics from the Committee on the Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods at the University of Chicago. He has taught in several American universities and colleges and for two years as a Fulbright Professor at Shandong University in China. His main fields of research and publication are Asian American literature, British colonial and postcolonial fiction, and ecological criticism. His articles have appeared in such journals as Melus, Ariel, Journal of Commonwealth Literature, World Literature Today, Critique, World Literature Written in English, and The Centennial Review. He is currently Professor of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan.

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